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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the differences in agenda setting of public issues in terms of their relative importance when two separate frames of reference were present in question formation. Specifically, 302 sophomore males from Syracuse University were asked to order issues in an intrapersonal context ("Which of these problems is the most important personally?") and in an interpersonal context ("Which of these problems have you talked about most frequently in the last month?). The reason the issue was considered important and the type of media deemed most relevant in forming opinions was also measured by self-report. Findings indicate little variation in agenda setting at the aggregate level, but considerable differences at the individual level, especially when questions are phrased in the interpersonal context. For intrapersonal items, TV and newspapers dominate the media as the most influential media type, and in the interpersonal context, TV dominates all but one issue. Finally, shift in frame of reference produces differences in the stated reasons for placing an item at the top of the agenda. In the intrapersonal context, respondents cite direct, personal effects, while in the interpersonal context direct reference to agenda setting is made. (KS)

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# A Comparison of Intra-Personal and Inter-Personal Agendas of Public Issues

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While there is general agreement among researchers examining the agenda-setting function of the mass media about the appropriate content analysis procedures for measuring media agendas, there is little consensus about the measurement of personal agendas among voters, students, and other populations. Review of the research done to date on agenda-setting shows considerable variety in the conceptualization and operationalization of agenda measures.

At least five different data collection techniques have been used to obtain measures of personal agendas. Open-ended questions have frequently been employed, appearing in the series of studies by McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1973) and also in Tipton et al. (1973). The major argument in favor of open-ended questions to elicit data on the importance of issues rests on their relative unobtrusiveness. The respondent is free to name any issue or topic that comes to mind. (There are, however, some hints in the data collected to date that even open-ended questions are subject to some degree of set. For example, inclusion of the term "public opinion," "government," or similar wordings seem to limit the number of highly personal, idiosyncratic responses. Nevertheless, the open-ended question does avoid having the researcher suggest an explicit agenda for ratification by the respondent.)

At the same time, the open-ended question reduces the comparability of responses across subjects. Since this is the case, there have been a number of attempts to obtain data from each respondent across a large

range of issues. Common to all these data-collection procedures is the necessity for tne researcher to submit a list of issues to the respondent. McLeod et al. (1973) asked respondents to rank-order a list of six issues. In a 1972 Durham study reported in the Working Papers respondents were asked to rate each issue as "Very important," "Somewhat important," or "Not at all important." The 1972 Syracuse Voter Study conducted by Patterson and McClure used seven-point scales to obtain respondents' ratings on the importance of various issues. The 1972 Charlotte Voter Study (McCombs, Shaw et al.) used paired-comparison scaling to obtain respondents' ratings on the issues.

There is also a major conceptual issue to be considered aside from the methodology of agenda measures. The influence process hypothesized in the agenda-setting function of the press can be conceptualized in either intra-personal or inter-personal terms. While most of the work to date has used intra-personal measures of issue salience, McLeod et al. (1973) point out the need for consideration of agenda-setting in inter-personal terms.

> "The agenda setting hypothesis asserts the media exert influence through the choice of certain issues for emphasis in news presentations and editorial comment as well as the omission of other issues. While there is little conflict regarding the thrust of this assertion in the literature, there is some question as to the proper indicant of influence. In other words, the dependent variable for the hypothesis has varied, stemming, perhaps, from the diverse origins of the concept. Park (1925) was most concerned with the effects of media presentation on the topics of conversation within a community served by the media; Lippmann (1922) was most concerned with the effects of the media presentation on the audience's view of reality.
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> . . .
>
> "In the McCombs and associates' operationalizations the dependent influence variables are intrapersonal. Yet the

> notion of the media setting the agenda for its audience seems to allow for a more general definition involving community or interpersonal interaction. A proper operationalization of this latter concept could involve asking respondents both what they talk about with other members of the community and what issues other community members are raising with them."

Ultimately, decisions on the proper operationalizing of agenda measures in inter-personal or intra-personal terms will depend on the theoretical context of the research. While both views are possible, one is likely to prove empirically more fruitful than the other. But that is the future. The more limited task at hand is to document patterns of convergence and divergence among the various measures of agenda-setting used to date. More particularly, this paper compares the data generated by open-ended measures (the dominant methodology in the agenda-setting research to date) of personal agendas conceptualized in intra-personal versus inter-personal terms.

Since the focus is on the internal validity of the agenda measures, a highly homogeneous population was selected as the source for the comparative data. Based on previous findings (Mullins, 1973) of greater variance in the agendas of female students than of male students, and of greater variance among seniors, the population selected for study was sophomore males residing in Syracuse University housing. Interviews were completed with 302 sophomores during the last week of October 1973. The interviewers were graduate students in two Newhouse School research methods courses.

## Findings

The leadoff open-ended question simply asked respondents to designate "... some of the major problems and issues facing the United States today."

Other than the general set established by introducing the interview as a public opinion poll, no set or frame of reference was established for responses to this opening query. Respondents could list as many issues or problems as they wished. The modal number listed was three.

Immediately after answering this general question, two specific frames of reference, intra-personal and inter-personal, were introduced. The two followup questions were:

> Which of these problems or issues is the most important to you, personally?
>
> Which of these problems or issues have you talked about most often with others during the past month?

The order of these questions was systematically rotated so that half of the respondents received the intra-personal question first and half received the inter-personal question first.

Analysis first focuses on the differences in aggregate agenda profiles resulting from differences in the way the open-ended question is put. What happens when a specific frame of reference is established? When the specific frame of reference shifts from the intra-personal to the inter-personal?

Five agenda profiles are compared in Table 1. Their sources are: I. the intra-personal question; II. the inter-personal question; III. first response to the initial open-ended query; IV. summation of the first three responses to the initial query; and V. summation of the first three responses to the initial query weighted for the order in which they were listed by the respondent.

It is clear that neither a shift in the frame of reference nor in

Table 1

Inter-Correlations of Five Aggregate Measures of Student Agendas

| | I | II | III | IV | V |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | — | +1 | +.90 | +.90 | +.90 |
| II | | — | +.90 | +.90 | +.90 |
| III | | | — | +1 | +1 |
| IV | | | | — | +.90 |
| V | | | | | — |

the amount and nature of data taken from the general open-ended question makes any substantial difference in the agenda profile. Three of the rank-orders are identical (rho = +1) and the remaining seven are all +.90, the result of a single transposition in ranks.

Across all five measures Watergate is ranked first; the Middle East, second; and Energy/Environmental problems, fifth. Rising prices and other, widely scattered concerns alternate between third and fourth position in the agendas.

However, these are aggregate agendas based in three of the five cases on first mentions only. The fact that Energy/Environmental problems are ranked first by only a minority and so end up in fifth position in the aggregate is no assurance that it ranks fifth among most members of the group. If agenda-setting were a simple hypodermic influence process, everyone exposed to the same news media should show identical agendas. The fact that a minority rank Energy/Environmental problems first raises important questions about how individuals build their agendas from the information in the news media. Most of the research to date has regarded agenda-setting as a sociological phenomenon and so matched aggregate group profiles against aggregate news coverage. But the next important step is to shift to the individual as the unit of analysis. For the data here this means examining individual profiles and individual differences in issue agendas as we shift and vary the frame of reference in the open-ended questions used to elicit personal agendas.

While there is considerable overlap in the replies to the general open-ended question and to the specific question about intra-personal importance (Table 2), the leadoff question used in the survey is not a perfect projective device by any means. Respondents do not fully project their personal concerns into the replies. If they did so, then close to 100% of the replies would fall along the main diagonal. But actually less than half of the responses (48.1%) fall on the principal diagonal. Even for Watergate, the most salient item on the agenda, only 54.1% of those listing Watergate first actually designated it as most important to them personally. Watergate does show the greatest consistency across the two questions. Lowest is Energy/Environment with only 29.4% of those first listing this problem area actually designating it as most important personally. The median level of agreement between first reply to the open-ended question and issue designated as most important personally is 41.4%, less than half. In short, a general open-ended question is a useful projective device for ascertaining intra-personal agendas, but the relationship is far from perfect.

The general open-ended question is somewhat more closely related to intra-personal concerns. Apparently respondents project more of what they talk about frequently than what they personally regard as important into their responses to the general open-ended question. In Table 3 nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of the responses fall on the principal diagonal. There is greater agreement here between first mention and the issue talked about most often. Watergate again shows the greatest consistency (80.8%, a considerable increase over the first mention/intra-personal concern comparison). However, the medians are quite similar for Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2

Issue Considered Personally Most Important by First Issue Mentioned

| | PERSONALLY MOST IMPORTANT | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rising Prices | Middle East | Watergate | Energy/ Environment | Other |
| Rising Prices (n = 29) | 41.4% | 20.7 | 13.8 | 10.3 | 13.8 |
| Middle East (n = 38) | 7.9% | 36.8 | 39.5 | 7.9 | 7.9 |
| Watergate (n = 159) | 10.7 | 16.4 | 54.1 | 8.8 | 10.1 |
| Energy/ Environment (n = 17) | 0.0 | 23.5 | 35.3 | 29.4 | 11.8 |
| Other (n = 19) | 5.3 | 15.8 | 26.3 | 5.3 | 47.4 |

$X^2 = 75.51$, 24dF, $p < .001$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.47

Table 3

Issue Talked About Most Frequently by First Issue Mentioned

| | TALKED ABOUT MOST FREQUENTLY | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rising Prices | Middle East | Watergate | Energy/ Environ-ment | Other |
| Rising Prices (n = 28) | 10.7% | 21.4 | 64.3 | 0.0 | 3.6 |
| Middle East (n = 36) | 0.0 | 47.2 | 44.4 | 0.0 | 8.3 |
| Watergate (n = 172) | 3.5 | 12.2 | 80.8 | 1.2 | 2.3 |
| Energy/ Environment (n = 19) | 0.0 | 36.8 | 47.4 | 15.8 | 0.0 |
| Other (n = 20) | 0.0 | 10.0 | 50.0 | 5.0 | 35.0 |

$X^2 = 99.95$, 28dF, $p < .001$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.51

To complete the comparisons Table 4 shows the relationship of intra-personal and inter-personal concerns. Again, we see some, but far from perfect, overlap in responses to the two questions.[1] When the individual respondent is the unit of analysis, designation of a specific frame of reference or a shift from an intra-personal frame to an inter-personal frame does produce changes in the items at the top of the agenda. In this specific set of data collected in fall 1973, Watergate is a major reason for the shift. While a majority listed it first in the interview and a majority also reported talking about Watergate most, less than half designated it as their most important personal concern. It is this disparity that reduces the overlap between the agendas produced by the three open-ended questions.

These contingency tables show considerably more slippage in the data than did the rank-order correlations reported in Table 1. At the aggregate level, individual variations resulting from frames of references apparently cancel themselves out. Also at the aggregate level, either a simple projective device or more specific conceptualization of the agenda measures in intra-personal or inter-personal terms seems to yield little difference in the data generated. But when the individual is the unit of analysis, differences in the conceptualization of the question put to respondents make a considerable difference. Since the research on agenda-setting at Syracuse University and the University of North Carolina is moving more and more toward the individual as the unit of analysis, some additional details of these intra-personal and inter-personal agendas will be considered here.

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[1]Here 54.6% of the cases fall on the diagonal.

Table 4

Issue Talked About Most Frequently by Issue Considered Personally Most Important

| | TALKED ABOUT MOST FREQUENTLY | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rising Prices | Middle East | Watergate | Energy/ Environ-ment | Other |
| Rising Prices (n = 32) | 15.6% | 21.9 | 62.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Middle East (n = 51) | 0.0 | 49.0 | 51.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Watergate (n = 116) | 2.6 | 12.1 | 82.8 | 1.7 | 0.9 |
| Energy Environment (n = 26) | 0.0 | 15.4 | 73.1 | 11.5 | 0.0 |
| Other (n = 35) | 2.9 | 8.6 | 51.4 | 0.0 | 37.1 |

$X^2 = 141.88$, 16dF, $p < .001$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.59

## Probing Behind Personal Agendas

Consideration of the methodological problems in measuring personal agendas is simply the opening step. As we move to use of the individual as the unit of analysis in agenda-setting research, it is necessary to consider the specific media sources relied upon, level of desire for more information, and personal reasons for talking about issues and considering them personally important in order to understand these communication situations. Agenda-setting is an influence process, but a process that can best be understood by taking into account the personal attributes and information-seeking behavior of the individuals in the news media audiences.

Edelstein (1973) has argued persuasively that trans-situational data on which news media people rely upon for information is quite unsatisfactory. Edelstein argues and offers data that the news medium preferred by an individual differs from situation to situation. For information on topic X an individual might find the newspaper most useful; for information on topic Y, it might be TV that is more useful. This situational approach to preferred or most useful sources of news suggests that the Roper data (1973) asserting that TV is used by more people than newspapers is at least partially artifactual.

If people sometimes find one medium more useful and sometimes another, replies to the trans-situational Roper questions may represent something of a meaningless average. To investigate the validity of this notion, the Syracuse sophomores were asked which source of information they found most useful both for (a) the issue they had designated personally most

important, and (b) the issue they reported talking about most during the past month.

For the issue considered personally most important there are wide variations in the sources of information found most useful. Neither newspapers nor television is considered the most useful sources for several of the issues shown in Table 5. And among sophomores who considered "rising prices" most important, about a third each named newspapers, television, and other sources as most helpful.

Considering only newspapers and television, neither is consistently selected over the other. Each ranks as the preferred source about half the time. For Watergate and the Middle East, the newspaper is a bit ahead. For rising prices and energy/environmental problems, TV is a bit preferred. Across all five comparisons in Table 5 the difference between the percentage naming newspapers (36.5% of all respondents) and the percentage naming television (36.9% of all respondents) is less than a half of one percent. Considering the wide variations within the table, this similarity in the marginals may be something of an artifactual balancing out.

With a shift in the situation — the frame of reference — specified as the context for evaluating which news source is most useful, the pattern of responses shows considerable change. In Table 6 television predominates as the most useful source among sophomores who report talking most during the past month about rising prices, the Middle East, Watergate, and energy/environmental problems. Again, however, the marginals for Table 6 show a difference of only 3.9% in the percentage of respondents naming newspapers and the percentage naming television. Perhaps the most interesting point

Table 5

Most Useful Source of Information by Issue Considered Personally Most Important

| | Newspapers | Television | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rising Prices (n = 19) | 31.6% | 36.8 | 31.6 |
| Middle East (n = 44) | 38.6 | 36.4 | 25.0 |
| Watergate (n = 95) | 42.1 | 41.1 | 16.8 |
| Energy Environment (n = 21) | 19.0 | 33.3 | 47.6 |
| Other (n = 24) | 29.2 | 25.0 | 45.8 |

$X^2 = 14.99$, 8dF, $p < .06$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.26

Table 6

Most Useful Source of Information by Issue Talked About Most Frequently

| | Newspapers | Television | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rising Prices (n = 7) | 28.6% | 42.9 | 28.6 |
| Middle East (n = 37) | 32.4 | 35.1 | 32.4 |
| Watergate (n = 151) | 39.7 | 43.7 | 16.6 |
| Energy/ Environment (n = 3) | 0.0 | 66.7 | 33.3 |
| Other (n = 10) | 30.0 | 10.0 | 60.0 |

$X^2 = 16.0$, 8dF, $p < .04$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.27

for future study is a tendency for television to be named somewhat more often as a useful source when the frame of reference for a specific issue under consideration is inter-personal.

## Need for Information

The students also were asked whether they had about as much information as they needed on the intra-personal and inter-personal issue they had named. There is very little variation across issues in the felt need for information, and this does not change with a shift in the frame of reference. Regardless of the specific issue named or the frame of reference, about three-fourths said they did not have enough information. There is unquestionably some social desirability bias in this data, inflating the number of sophomores expressing a need for greater information. But if we assume that this bias is uniform across issues and frames of reference, it is interesting that no other differences seem to be present.

Respondents also were asked why they had designated a particular issue as the one that was personally most important to them; and a little later in the interview, why they thought the issue they had talked about most frequently was in fact talked about so much.

Again we see that a shift in the frame of reference produces shifts in the kinds of reasons offered by the sophomores for placing an issue at the top of their intra-personal or inter-personal agenda. There also are interesting variations across issues.

Across all five intra-personal issues (Table 7), a direct effect on the individual is cited most frequently (35.7% of all respondents) as the

Table 7

Reason an Issue Is Considered Personally Most Important by Issues

| | Philo-sophic | Jewish or Friend | Funda-mental Concern | Direct Effect | Future Impact | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rising Prices (n = 33) | 12.1% | 0.0 | 6.1 | 75.8 | 0.0 | 6.1 |
| Middle East (n = 53) | 3.8 | 41.5 | 0.0 | 18.9 | 28.3 | 7.5 |
| Watergate (n = 115) | 27.0 | 0.0 | 15.7 | 28.7 | 10.4 | 18.3 |
| Energy/ Environment (n = 28) | 10.7 | 0.0 | 14.3 | 46.4 | 25.0 | 3.6 |
| Other (n = 34) | 35.3 | 0.0 | 11.8 | 38.2 | 2.9 | 11.8 |

$X^2 = 161.10$, 20dF, $p < .001$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.61

reason for placing an issue at the top of the agenda. But across all five inter-personal issues (Table 8), the most frequently cited reason (34.4% of all respondents) is that an issue is in the news. The relationship of this response to the notion of agenda-setting is obvious, and the data hints that inter-personal agendas may be more susceptible to agenda-setting influences by the press. In any event, respondents explain their inter-personal agendas quite often in terms of the frequency of press coverage.

An obvious next step for future analysis of this data is the comparison of intra-personal and inter-personal agendas with news media agendas. It might be especially interesting to examine the inter-personal agendas of those sophomore who justified their discussion of an issue in terms of its freqent appearance in the news.

## Summary

At the aggregate level, either a simple projective device or more specific conceptualization of agenda measures in intra-personal or inter-personal terms seems to yield little difference in the data generated. But when the individual is the unit of analysis, differences in the conceptualization of the question put to respondents make a considerable difference. In an intra-personal context there is only 48.1% overlap with the general open-ended question. But when an inter-personal context is specified there is 61.5% overlap in the responses.

Table 8

Reason an Issue Is Discussed Most Frequently by Issues

| | In the News Most Often | Most Talked About | Philosophic | Jewish or Friend | Direct Effect | Most Current | Future Impact | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rising Prices (n = 9) | 11.1% | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 77.8 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 11.1 |
| Middle East (n = 53) | 9.4 | 7.5 | 1.9 | 30.2 | 13.2 | 13.2 | 18.9 | 5.7 |
| Watergate (n = 197) | 46.2 | 8.6 | 4.6 | 0.5 | 8.1 | 9.1 | 8.1 | 14.7 |
| Energy/ Environment (n = 7) | 0.0 | 14.3 | 28.6 | 0.0 | 57.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Other (n = 16) | 0.0 | 6.3 | 18.8 | 6.3 | 37.5 | 6.3 | 0.0 | 25.0 |

$X^2 = 163.68$, 28dF, $p < .001$

Contingency Coefficient = 0.61

When respondents were asked which source of information they found most useful for the issue they had named, striking differences are produced by the two contexts. For intra-personal items TV and newspapers each dominate on about half the issues. But in an inter-personal context TV dominates all but one issue. One could speculate on the appropriateness of each type of information (TV news style and content versus newspaper style and content) for conversations and personal reflection. But that is a future point of inquiry.

Finally we see that a shift in the frame of reference produces differences in the reasons cited for placing an item at the top of the agenda. In an intra-personal context respondents cite direct, personal effects. In an inter-personal context explicit references are made to agenda-setting. Respondents explain frequent discussion of an issue in terms of its frequent appearance in the news.

#

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